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Formal Rationality Traps in Administration of Higher Education Institutions in Russia

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Abstract

The paper discusses reforms to the higher education system in Russia in the context of its integration into the European education realm. The authors single out key decisions and actions taken within reformation of education: desacralization of the education process, introducing technologies to education, and configuring Russian education according to Western patterns. The paper examines rationalization as an umbrella notion for changes in the higher education system. The concept of formal rationalization is defined, its risks and drawbacks for higher education are discussed. The authors single out markers of formal rationalization in administration and structure of higher education institutions on the basis of own sociological research. Characteristic traits of the bureaucratic worldview in Russian higher education institutions are analyzed. The causes of formal rationality traps in higher education are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The system of higher education of the Soviet Union, adopted by modern Russia, had both advantages, such as its aspiration for polymathy and a distinct humanitarian slant, and drawbacks, namely the priority of theory over practice and underdeveloped criteria for assessment of knowledge and skills which entailed subjectivity. Despite the controversial nature of the Soviet heritage, this system had a significant potential. The process was interrupted in late 80ies – early 90ies due to the general turn of Russian policy towards integration into the European cultural

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space. In education it eventually led to joining of the so-called Bologna process which required a thorough revision of main parameters of higher education and reorganization of its institutions.

Yet, in the real education process, which often diverges from declarations made by education authorities and the Bologna process ideologists, the selected strategy was embodied in a number of regulations and actions controversial both in their content and socio-cultural consequences. The major changes include:

- rejection of the traditional Russian view of education as a set of practices aiming at passing cultural codes from one generation to the next and adoption of the concept of education as a service within the mass-market sector;
- desacrualization of education process and rejecting as outdated the concept of education as a personalized process of interaction between the Teacher and the Student;
- technification of education through standardization, regulation and development of broad sets of indicators and criteria for assessment of the whole education system and its aspects;
- configuration of the Russian education system according to Western (mainly Anglo-American) patterns and the quest to establish regular, though usually unbalanced, contacts with arbitrarily chosen and not always the best Western institutions.

Both the past and ongoing reforms can be analyzed through the prism of rationalization of higher education in Russia. This idea was merely one of the trends in the Western education, but Russian authorities have taken it as a universal and uncompromised strategy.

The idea of rationalization itself has a significant potential, especially in mass education with its increasing integration with industry and formation of practice-oriented ‘technical knowledge’. Yet, it becomes increasingly clear that in the course of its implementation, the call for rationality may easily turn into its opposite, which is especially true for Russia, as its culture always had a powerful irrational basis. It creates a certain formal rationality trap, and this paper will analyze its nature and consequences for Russian institutions of higher education.

The problem of formal rationality was discussed in a number of socio-humanistic studies. As defined by Max Weber (1990), formal rationality (‘Formalrationalität’) is rationality as such; it is a rational action subject to rational calculation, i.e. to counting, accounting and quantitative measurement. It is viewed as a quintessence of the Western culture. V.S. Stepin (2000) argues that, being technology-related, it naturally embraces the notion of man as an active being, the idea of an active sovereign person, the priority of innovation and progress and the cult of power and force. Moreover, G. Ritzer (2002) notes that it has not diminished since M. Weber’s times, but has spread over the new spheres of social life. As G. Ritzer notes, there exist four dimensions of formal rationality: efficiency, predictability, calculability and control as replacement of human by unified non-human technologies.

In view of the characteristics of (post)modern public administrations, the question whether the rationality of their structures and functions, and through this the rationality of their outcomes, can be safeguarded is of paramount interest (Snellen, 2002). The interest to rationality of social institutions significantly increased with the development of the theory of social technologies (Valeev & Shangareev, 2009; Zajcev, 1989; Djatchenko, 1993; Ivanov, 1995; Nikredin, 1992; Markov, 1982; Patrushev, 2006; Stefanov, 1976; Stefanov, 1980). The theory argues that almost all social processes may be algorithmized and optimized but it often fail to take into account a vast range of nonlinear systems where “there are not many rules which allow foreseeing the next state of a system univocally and with a certain confidence by its current state and by the impacts on it” (Liseev & Sadovskij, 2004).

A number of papers analyzed certain aspects of rationalization of education systems (Walton, 1976; Eacott, 2015; Hatcher, 1998). Nevertheless, the problem of risks and drawbacks of rationalization in higher education institutions was not developed to an extent that would allow minimizing the said risks.

2. Objectives, methodology and research design

The paper is based on sociological studies carried out in Belgorod State National Research University in 2010 – 2013. They include the monitoring of students’ satisfaction with the quality of education (an annual survey of university applicants, students and lecturers by means of multistage quota sampling; n=1052 respondents); the questionnaire survey “Management of innovation development of a higher education institution” conducted by Ja.I. Serkina in September – November 2012 (conducted in higher education institutions in Belgorod, Volgograd, Kursk, Lipetsk and Orel regions by means of multistage quota sampling). It was carried out among the administrative personnel of higher education institutions – 151 pers., the academic staff and lecturers – 603 pers. Also included an

in-depth interview of experts experienced in interaction of university subdivisions – 17 experts, incl. deans, heads of chairs, professors with extensive work experience, heads of departments and divisions and a questionnaire survey among heads of chairs on challenges of the education process in 2011 (n= 78).

These studies prove that the process of formal rationalization in administration of higher education institutions is very dynamic. In this paper we adopt the definition of formal rationalization by Max Weber (1990), i.e. a systematic practice of achievement of statutory indicators evolving in full compliance with a set of compulsory universal operations. At present the philosophy of formal rationalization in administration of higher education institutions and in organization of their life as a whole is not only legitimate, but also ideologically founded. It is conceptualized in the following statements:

- pseudo-innovation reducing innovations in higher education institutions only to rationalization of the education process;
- technological fetishism, based on the belief that any problem can be re-solved with carefully developed and successfully introduced managerial algorithms;
- overestimation of Western experience in organization of education with declaring its models universal and adaptable to Russian education system.

Formal rationalization of management of higher education institutions is embodied in a range of decisions and actions. Yet, many of them create a trap for higher education institutes and, above all, for their administration.

The first trap lies in an ungrounded expansion of the administrative personnel as a consequence of formalization of the education process. We find it reasonable that the administration expands due to the complexity of interactions between the higher education establishment and other institutions. Still, such growth often sees no limits and leads to reduplication of administration bodies. We argue that it results in a boost of bureaucracy in education. Still, the interviewed experts offer different opinions as to the causes of this trap. Some of them attributed it to the general trend of the development of the society, especially of the information society (“We can see that computers become a ‘fetish’. The education process depends on errors in a software program. As a result, there exist two concurrent processes, a virtual and a real one, and this trend is typical for the whole country”).

At the same time, some respondents were harsher in their opinion that the bureaucratic boost in higher education institutions is caused by the introduction of unnatural management methods into the academic sphere, the process which eventually leads to annihilation of academic freedoms (“The causes of this process lie in application of principles of a state agency administration to the specific academic environment: the authorities traditionally take managerial decisions based on the reports prepared by their subordinates”). Higher education institutions render educational services and produce development projects which often cannot be institutionalized (scientific achievements and admission of contract students cannot be pre-planned and, therefore, cannot be subject to economic planning).

3. Discussion of the research outcomes

It is true that the bureaucracy in higher education institutions constantly reproduces the bureaucratic worldview in the academic environment, though this worldview is often inconsistent with the educational aims and traditions. The most infamous traits of the bureaucratic worldview include:

- simplification (primitivation) of social phenomena and processes which leads to the contrastive perception of the reality without shades and without considering options. At the same time, the society becomes increasingly diverse, and the social systems, including the education system, become non-linear which opens them up for potential strategic breakthroughs;
- distorted corporatism, which distorts the inter-group communication because it does not presuppose respect to the position of the opponent who represents another (less successful) corporation. Adherence to this assumption by administrators and by proponents of this concept from other status groups desocializes public practices, because, as M. Weber (1990) claimed, “action is social when, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual(s), it takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby guided”;
- adhocratic (from ‘ad hoc’) treatment of the managed objects and social issues, if the latter do not fall into the administrator’s personal interests. The priority of formal indicators in the administrator’s work makes the latter

almost unable to comprehend general issues or fundamental processes and trends of social development. As a result, an administrator has minimum opportunities to master strategic management though this task is set to him by his senior managers with increasing frequency and usually with no success;

- exaggerated symbolic demarcation as a prerequisite for internal and external communication. It is manifested in a rigid status segregation, in overestimation of the status and, correspondingly, in transference of the status values to the person. Demarcation consistently divides 'Us' (i.e. those directly included in the administrative-management process or related to it in any way) and 'Them' who stay outside the administration and are objects of influence. This positioning often underlies decisions that are not always aimed at resolving real issues. In the recent time, one of the most important lines of intra-academic demarcation is the treatment of innovations. Due to its functionary status and view of an academic institution as a service provider, the administrative personnel encourages innovations, usually blueprinted from the Western institutions, without analyzing their consequences. It is not accidentally, that the survey "Management of innovation development of a higher education institution" revealed that only 10% of administrators did not support the idea of the development and introduction of innovations into Russian higher education institutions. At the same time, academicians, who chiefly preserve the traditional vision of an academic establishment as aimed at passing of the cultural values, are much more reserved in their treatment of innovations. Among them only 58.21% of the respondents supported the introduction of innovations, while 27.86% categorically reject them. As the main reasons of their lack of interest the respondents name the 'lack of return' on efforts put to the innovative projects (35.12%), no connection between the successful introduction of the innovations, financial support of the innovator and his/her promotion (24.4%), and 28.57% named the adverse impact of innovations on the education process and lack of support by the authorities;
- idealization and universal application of administrative control. The belief in extraordinarily broad powers, if not all-might, of control is typical for bureaucrats who treat such control one-sidedly as a formal official act performed by authorized structures and officials.

The second trap is the excessive standardization and regulation of education. In itself, the introduction of standards and regulations into the work of higher education institutions is obviously necessary. Yet, in practice the number of regulations goes beyond reason, and the regulations constantly change due to the absence of a solid education strategy. It results in inventing of new types of reports. The document and file flows for low-level administrators, mainly, for heads of chairs, grow. They have increasingly more administrative functions, which is reflected in the public opinion. For instance, in the course of the survey conducted among heads of chairs, 54.39% of the respondents agreed that the amount of 'paperwork' has increased in the past years. Besides, 29.49% of the respondents named a big amount of formal functions that interfere with their principal activities as the main reason of dissatisfaction with their work.

In the course of the expert interview the respondents also noted intensification of ungrounded demands and commands ("We can see an increased flow of demands and commands from different uncoordinated bodies which hampers adequate implementation of any of them"; "preparation of diverse (and constantly changing) planning forms and reports distracts lecturers and scientists from their principle activities and, therefore, reduces their effectiveness. Thus, one of the main ways to reduce the burden is to delegate the planning and reporting functions (namely, preparation of documents, their approval and bureaucratic support) from chairs, departments and scientific units to the administrative bodies. A most important step, in my opinion, is to grant the maximum organizational, administrative and to some extent economic independence to (non-administrative) units, such as departments, chairs, REC, national verification centers and labs").

The third trap is deformation of the control function. The ambition to emphasize controlling practices is typical for any bureaucratic system, as control is viewed by its representatives not only as a means to achieve the set parameters of development of the managed entity, but also as a means serving their own corporate interests which becomes especially important in a potentially unstable environment. Such environment is typical for most higher education institutions. Moreover, their inherent commitment for intellectual and cognitive work presupposes their aspiration for maximum freedom from control. Traditionally, such freedom is viewed as a prerequisite for creative activity.

As shown by our research, controlling practices in universities are now regarded as excessive by the majority of the personnel. In particular, 64% of the heads of chairs are mostly satisfied with organization of control. Yet, we can

think of this degree of satisfaction as a reflection of the status of this group as officials who directly exercise control. Nevertheless, even in this group the ratio of dissatisfaction exceeds one third of the respondents. The main reasons for dissatisfaction, noted by the heads of chairs, are the excessive number of controllers (61%) and the formality of control (30%).

The last reason appears to be inherent for formal rationalization of educational activity. It reveals the increasingly greater shift in controlling practices to assessment not of the real process but of its symbolic representations. The experts stress that control is increasingly often exercised through paperwork which depersonalizes it (“The interaction between authorities and administrative divisions with chairs is organized top-down, i.e. authorities and administrative divisions give instructions, request information and demand timely reports about implementation of their commands. Chairs can only execute their numerous orders. ‘Grassroots’ initiative is unwelcome”).

The forth trap, which is the excessive increase of document and file flows and the reducing quality of the documents, is closely linked with the deformation of the control technology. For instance, the experts noted intensification of groundless requests and orders (“We can see an increased flow of demands and commands from different uncoordinated bodies which hampers adequate implementation of any of them”; “with insufficient information necessary for chairs (in fact, due to simulation of work in administrative divisions, chairs do not have sufficient informational, analytical, organizational etc. support in their academic and educational work), we often have merely formal events which are poorly thought out and are conducted by ill-qualified people”).

The poor quality of communication is caused by the increasing amount thereof, the necessity to take into account numerous formalities, and administrators’ incompetence. This process immanently leads to a strain both in vertical (administration – personnel) and horizontal (peer) relations that adversely affects the corporate environment. The experts state that the increasing formalism leads to estrangement between the participants of the education process and eventually to increasing dehumanization, which is especially inappropriate in Arts Schools. Dehumanization causes loss of the meaning of life, dissatisfaction with work and deep discomfort for academicians and students (“The university should not be transformed into a ‘factory of soullessness’, producing robot-like unhappy people and not harmonious proactive and creative personalities capable of self-fulfillment and leadership, of setting and achieving their big individual goals in life *pro bono publicum*”).

4. Conclusion

Thus, the traps of formal rationality in administration of higher education institutions are caused by the imbalanced implementation of rather reasonable steps directed, as seen by their initiators, at increasing of the competitiveness of the given institutions at the education market.

A natural question is where such traps are rooted as without its understanding they are almost imminent, as is shown by many universities.

We suppose that to a great extent the traps are formed as a result of the global trends in science and education. This process is characterized by V. Lektorskiy as follows, “A feature of our time is that, on the one hand, science intervenes in more and more disputes with developers of new technologies, and on the other hand, it grows closer to the production thereof. It has a tremendous impact on the way the science is done, and on the people who do it. The term ‘technoscience’ emerges” (Lektorskiy, 2015).

Similar processes are seen in the sphere of higher education which is closely connected to science. D.L. Konstantinovskij, A.A. Ovsjannikov and N.Ye. Pokrovskij (2005) state, “If previously knowledge and science were based on the Enlightenment worldview and considered as an absolute and boundless value, at present it gave way to the notion of ‘useful knowledge’, i.e. knowledge, limited in principle, focused on the specific aspects and aimed at a result rendering immediate economic gain”.

Similarly to science, education witnesses the emergence of ‘technoeducation’ that needs new managers and performers. Its specificity lies in the chiefly utilitarian perception of the academic institution; the perception of the education process as a special case of management having certain peculiarities but similar to the management of other spheres; the orientation to the ‘cost-effectiveness of educational activity’ chiefly by cutting ‘unreasonable’

costs, such as lecturers' salaries. Finally, such administrators are committed to all rules set by the Federal agencies and eagerly implement them.

Yet, till recently the education environment was not ready to produce such administrators. Managers within such environment, who started their careers as assistants and ended as rectors, are governed by the traditional vision of education as an educational, developmental and socializing process. This was the reason why Russian higher education officials are chiefly state (and sometimes municipal) officers with an academic degree. They enter the university as a built-up team and usually try to configure the education environment according to the principle of formal rationality. As a result, higher education institutions receive a chance to survive in the current socioeconomic climate, but they have to reject their traditional values and basic concepts.

As a result, both the authors of the reforms and the majority of the academic staff fall into the trap of formal rationality and have to choose whether to accept new rules of the game or to be pushed away from the education realm either totally or partly, remaining at its periphery.

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